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ABSTRACT

This report documents a process developed and used by the South-Eastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) to guide 12 districts in Georgia through the planning and development of a school-improvement plan. Ultimately, a total of 35 schools successfully completed plans during the study. Each school developed a plan for school improvement to be implemented beginning the next school year. The process was based on research that provided schools with the necessary tools to get started, stay focused, and achieve desired results. This publication briefly discusses the process developed by SERVE, presents factors that seem to facilitate a school's development of its plan, and explains how the task might be approached differently in the future. Implementing a school-improvement plan calls for all stakeholders-principals, teachers, parents, students, and community representatives-to band together with a shared vision and set of goals if children are ultimately to benefit. The document is designed to be useful as a resource for those people who are seeking to lead school-improvement efforts. (DFR)

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Planning School Improvement

A Report on a Comprehensive Planning Process

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Planning for School Improvement

A Report on a Comprehensive Planning Process

There are many interpretations of school improvement. For some, school improvement simply means making a change for the better. For others, it is an ongoing comprehensive and systematic process. If real change is to occur, it must happen continually, not as a one-time event (Kadel-Taras, 1996). The process must be coordinated and planned rather than viewed as a random reaction or response only when problems arise. A number of writers on educational reform have outlined stages of change through which most schools progress (Conley, 1993; Follman, Vedros, & Curry, 1992; Fullan, 1991).

Planning for School Improvement: A Report on a Comprehensive Planning Process documents a process developed and used by the South-Eastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) to guide 12 districts in Georgia through the planning and development of a school improvement plan. The process is based on research that provides schools with the necessary tools to get started, stay focused, and achieve desired results (Follman et al., 1992). In this publication, the reader will find a brief discussion of the process developed by SERVE, factors that seemed to facilitate a school's development of its plan, and how the task might be approached differently in the future. It is hoped that principals, district administrators, teachers, parents, and community representatives who are seeking to lead school improvement efforts will find this document useful as a resource for planning.

One State's Story

Getting Involved

In 1994, Brooks County, Georgia, approached SERVE for assistance in developing a schoolwide Title I plan. Previously, funds from Title I could be used only to serve a limited number of identified students.

An opportunity existed to develop a plan that would allow the funds to be used to serve all students. The district needed a process that would separate the task into manageable parts, maintain focus, and complete the plan by the end of the year. SERVE responded by developing a planning process that:

- assisted schools in getting started
- helped them determine where they were in the reform process
- moved them toward the development of a clear set of goals and objectives, and
- ultimately led to a completed action plan ready for implementation.

The Process for Improvement

In early 1995, as a result of the work in one district, SERVE was contacted by eleven more districts in south Georgia to assist in the development of schoolwide school improvement plans. By summer of 1995, a total of 35 schools in twelve districts were engaged in planning for improvement. Although each district varied to some extent in the number of schools and overall student population, they were very similar in other respects. Most of the districts were located in rural settings where agriculture was the primary source of income. The overall racial composition of students was predominantly minority. Achievement scores were below state averages. All schools qualified for Title 1 funds and wanted to improve opportunities for their students.

Forming a Team

"I would have preferred more parents and business leaders."

As a first step, SERVE encouraged each district to form a diverse team with a stake in school improvement: parents, business leaders, local government officials, district staff, administrators, and students. This helped ensure that all stakeholders would have "buy-in" into the process and be supportive of the plan. The district teams were designed to provide leadership for the school in all stages of school improvement and to be responsible for relaying information to other staff members.

Although many of the schools formed teams that were broadly diverse, others did not. As one district administrator later commented, *"I would have preferred more parents and business leaders."*

Developing a Vision and Mission

Next, teams learned that building a strong commitment and communicating a vision of its improved school were important responsibilities. They were led through a process of defining a clear vision of where to go and how to get there. Without this vision, the team would be unable to lead others. The task of developing a vision and mission for their school proved difficult for some of the teams. Not only were team members asked to share their ideas of the future for their youth, but they were also asked to agree on a vision of an improved system. When each team had developed draft vision and mission statements, they were encouraged to present their statements to other members of the school staff for feedback and approval. In some cases, revisions were minimal or unnecessary; however, in other cases, changes were significant.

Conducting a Needs Assessment

Teams soon learned that a vital component of school improvement was conducting a community needs assessment. It required administration, teachers, and other school staff to prepare for honest feedback from the community. If true improvement were to occur, the school could not simply ask for input; it must be willing to act upon it. The next step, therefore, involved preparing school districts to conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment. Because each school was unique and had its own set of needs and wants, they were asked to assess themselves first. They gathered information about the school and its community from parents, school staff, business leaders, and students. They analyzed student achievement scores, attendance data, rates of retention, discipline records, and high school graduation rates. Gathering information from the school and community about perceived needs and interests provided a solid planning base. Until this needs assessment was conducted, team members could only guess the needs of the school.

Conducting the needs assessment and interpreting the results was difficult for a number of the school teams. Few of the teams had previous experience in conducting needs assessments. Consequently, there was a tendency for teams to look for ready-made surveys that could easily be

distributed to participants. In some instances, teams had given little thought as to what concerns they might want to explore, what questions they might ask, or what the results would yield. Teams were encouraged to carefully consider a variety of assessment techniques including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. However, most chose to conduct a survey because of the ease of distribution and the large number of individuals who could be questioned at one time. Unfortunately, many of the teams were dissatisfied with the depth of information provided by the survey, and because of the limited amount of time, teams were reluctant to probe issues further via focus group or interview.

Establishing a Research Base

As teams worked through the year, they learned that a strong research base was critical to their school improvement effort. They reviewed the literature and learned that the research on effective schools lists twelve characteristics or factors that seem to be present when schools are effective in bringing about significant gains in student achievement (Follman et al., 1992; Lezotte, 1989). These characteristics are well documented in the research literature and can provide a broad base for planning. SERVE staff encouraged school teams to become familiar with this research on "effective schools" and asked that each school begin to address these characteristics in their planning. SERVE staff also encouraged school teams to stay abreast of "best practices" as they continued work to improve their competence and effectiveness in the classroom. A number of resources were offered that would assist in identifying best practices (e.g., database clearinghouse, materials and products, referrals to other schools). The most successful schools were those that let the research guide their planning. These schools consulted the research literature and found strategies or activities that might be most effective in improving student achievement. Other teams struggled as they attempted to first write a plan and then scan for research to support their ideas or strategies.

Setting Goals

Once the self-assessment was completed and analyzed, schools were encouraged to use the results to set goals and to design, develop, and implement a plan to meet the goals. (Note: Once again, while the school team may lead this effort, all school staff should be involved in setting goals and establishing an action plan. Clear articulation of the goals will help motivate and mobilize the school to action).

Developing an Action Plan

After team members had identified a set of goals, they were ready to develop an action plan for achieving those goals. SERVE offered a format which allowed each school team to: (1) identify the rationale for addressing each goal, (2) list the strategies to be used to achieve the goal, (3) list the resources necessary to meet the goal, (4) identify the person(s) responsible for carrying out strategies, and (5) establish a specific timeline. Again, school teams varied in their handling of this task. Some schools held meetings to inform other staff members and assembled committees to address each goal. Other teams seemed to work on their own without the support of other staff members.

"This was the first experience for many of our team members in strategic planning. The training on teamwork and assessing needs was extremely useful and valuable."

Providing Staff Development/ Training

As part of the school improvement planning process, it was important for school teams to work and collectively reach decisions. Although the members of the team knew each other well and had worked together in some capacity, there were occasional difficulties as participants learned about other's values and personalities. As one district administrator noted, *"This was the first experience for many of our team members in strategic planning. The training on teamwork ...was extremely useful and valuable."*

Outcome

Ultimately, a total of thirty-five schools in twelve districts successfully completed plans during this two year study. Each school developed a three-to-five-year plan for school improvement to be implemented beginning the next school year. Although each plan differed to some extent in terms of length (typically 20-30 pages) and order of items, there were basic components that each plan contained:

Introduction - In the introduction, schools reported the demographic make-up of the community and county (e.g., total population, ethnic

diversity, primary industry), and provided a description of the school, including number of students, ethnic diversity of student population, and number of professional staff. Many schools also chose to include a copy of the vision and mission statements that they had developed during the planning process.

Needs assessment - This section of the plan included a narrative description of who was assessed and how. Samples of surveys and interview formats were illustrated in an attached appendix. This section also included a report of the results of the needs assessment and an interpretation of the results. Many schools attempted to capture the data in graphic form, as well as narrative, by featuring charts, tables, and graphs.

Goals and action plan - Based on the results of the needs assessment, schools identified a set of goals and developed an action plan for each goal. Each action plan included a (1) rationale for addressing the goal, (2) list of strategies to be used to achieve the goal, (3) list of resources necessary to meet the goal, (4) person(s) responsible for carrying out strategies, and (5) specific timeline for accomplishing the goal. Because it was important to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan, schools also provided some discussion of how they intended to measure their progress toward goals.

Schools were required to offer some evidence that the strategies they would be using were effective in achieving their goals. This meant reviewing the relevant literature and integrating a discussion of the research into the proposed plan.

Professional development plan - The professional development plan provided a description of staff development activities to be conducted during the upcoming school year. Activities were identified through the needs assessment and were designed to coincide with the school's goals. Schools not only included a description of potential topics and activities but also a list of possible speakers and consultants.

Transition plan - The transition plan included strategies that schools would use to make the move smoother from one school to another or from one grade to another for students and their families. For example, in order to facilitate students' transition from Head Start into kindergarten, one school agreed to schedule a meeting between Head Start

teachers and kindergarten teachers to discuss each program and gain a better understanding of expectations.

Parent involvement plan - Each plan described the school's effort to involve parents in the education of their children. The parent involvement plan included specific activities for involving parents, as well as policies for communicating with parents through conferences, phone calls, or written notes.

Parent involvement compact - A compact is a written statement of what schools and parents are supposed to do to help students achieve. Each school developed a compact outlining the roles and responsibilities of parents and school personnel in the educational process. Some schools also included students as partners in the compact.

Looking Back

Concerns

- In general, school teams were composed primarily of teachers. Occasionally, a media specialist, a paraprofessional, or a school counselor was a team member. Very rarely were parents, students, or business persons a part of the team. Teams were also underrepresented in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity. Although most of the schools served a predominantly rural, low-income, minority population, membership on the school teams did not always reflect this. Broader representation might have created a greater sense of community ownership and investment in education.

- In a few instances, SERVE staff arrived at a district to learn that team members did not fully understand the reason for the meeting or their role. In each instance, valuable meeting time was devoted to briefing team members on basics–why they were there and what their responsibilities and duties would be if they agreed to remain on the team.

- Team members were often unprepared for the amount of work required to develop a school improvement plan. Although SERVE staff met on four occasions throughout the year with each school, much of the team's work should have been accomplished during the intervals. As each meeting came to an end, SERVE asked each team

to develop a "To Do" list that would guide the work that needed to be completed prior to the next scheduled meeting. Often, SERVE staff would return to a district to find that the work had not been completed, and that the team was unprepared to move on to the next stage. In other cases, the work was completed, but the workload was not distributed evenly among team members.

- Finally, some districts failed to obtain adequate buy-in for the plan from other stakeholders. Even though they knew that one key to a successful plan was to keep other stakeholders (e.g., school staff, parents, business leaders, community representatives) involved in the work, they had difficulty finding the time to meet and garner support. During each meeting, districts were encouraged to share information with other staff members and gather additional feedback. While some districts took great pains to involve their staff and outside stakeholders, others did not. For the latter, their plans did not have the full support of the school or community.

Lessons Learned

While each school completed a plan for school improvement, the quality and comprehensiveness of the plan depended on a number of different factors:

- One factor that contributed to the quality of the schoolwide plan was the overall professionalism of the school team. Some team members stayed abreast of "best practices," either by reading journals and professional materials, pursuing post-graduate degrees, or attending relevant conferences. Because of this, they were usually better able to identify options for approaching the problem, outline the advantages and disadvantages of each option, and select the best possible solution. A few teams had members experienced in gathering information through the Internet or database clearinghouses. These members brought useful information to their teams in addition to the searches that SERVE's Database Information Services Clearinghouse conducted on their behalves. While all team members had perceptive and insightful solutions, without input from current research, teams were at risk of reinventing the wheel or making mistakes that could have been avoided.

- Leadership both at the school level and from the district played a vital role in the successful development of a school improvement plan. While the primary leaders and implementers of change varied from system to system, it was important that team members felt empowered and supported.

- In an effort to structure the work into small, reasonable sections, the process was presented to the school teams in bits and pieces; however, this seemed to hinder some teams from seeing the "big picture." In retrospect, it may have been helpful to begin with the end in mind and lay out for teams how the various parts fit together.

- In working with a few of the schools, it became apparent that there was a lack of support from the superintendent and/or central office supervisors. While there was not active opposition, some district personnel were minimally involved in school improvement efforts and maintained little contact with school teams. At times, this became an important point, particularly when school teams were asked to make decisions that required some knowledge of the budget for the upcoming year.

- In most cases, the school principal was a critical player in the successful development and implementation of the school improvement plan. The most successful teams looked to the principal to support and encourage their work and stay abreast of concerns and needs; however, it was the team that determined the direction of goals, activities, and requirements for improvement.

- Initially, SERVE agreed to facilitate a process to complete the work. The process was designed to be flexible enough to be used by districts engaged in any type of long-term planning. SERVE maintained that any state or federal requirements should be communicated by the district-level administrator. However, as work progressed, SERVE staff found they needed to be more familiar with local, state, or federal guidelines and requirements critical to the work. As mentioned earlier, there were some districts where involvement from the district office was minimal and invitations to district level personnel were seldom acknowledged. Consequently, SERVE staff made an effort to become familiar with the requirements for Title 1 and school improvement by attending local and regional meetings.

- Other considerations for developing a successful plan were more logistical in nature and included scheduling the meeting away from the school (to minimize distractions and interruptions) and inviting school teams to participate in the process together.

- There were two advantages to inviting two or more school teams to participate together in the planning process. One advantage was that it allowed SERVE staff to reach a larger number of individuals and was more cost effective than trying to work with individual schools. A second advantage was that it allowed teams to see how other schools approached the planning process and the ways in which they tackled difficult tasks. In this sense, school teams were able to learn from each other and see that there was often more than one way to address a concern, divide the work, or approach a specific problem.

Conclusion

Developing a schoolwide school improvement plan takes an enormous amount of time and energy. Implementing a school improvement plan calls for all stakeholders—principal, teachers, parents, students, and community representatives—to band together with a shared vision and set of goals if children are ultimately to benefit. Following a comprehensive planning process, such as the one used by these schools, aids schools and districts in successfully completing a plan that can be effectively implemented.

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About the SERVE Organization

SERVE, the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education, is a consortium of educational organizations whose mission is to promote and support the continual improvement of educational opportunities for all learners in the Southeast. Formed by a coalition of business leaders, governors, policymakers, and educators seeking systemic, lasting improvement in education, the organization is governed and guided by a Board of Directors that includes the chief state school officers, governors, and legislative representatives from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Committed to creating a shared vision of the future of education in the Southeast, the consortium impacts educational change by addressing critical educational issues in the region, acting as a catalyst for positive change, and serving as a resource to individuals and groups striving for comprehensive school improvement.

SERVE's core component is a regional educational laboratory funded since 1990 by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. Building from this core, SERVE has developed a system of programs and initiatives that provides a spectrum of resources, services, and products for responding effectively to national, regional, state, and local needs. SERVE is a dynamic force, transforming national education reform strategies into progressive policies and viable initiatives at all levels. SERVE Laboratory programs and key activities are centered around

- Applying research and development related to improving teaching, learning, and organizational management
- Serving the educational needs of young children and their families more effectively
- Providing field and information services to promote and assist local implementation of research-based practices and programs

- Offering policy services, information, and assistance to decision makers concerned with developing progressive educational policy

- Connecting educators to a regional computerized communication system so that they may search for and share information and network

- Developing and disseminating publications and products designed to give educators practical information and the latest research on common issues and problems

The Eisenhower Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education at SERVE is part of the national infrastructure for the improvement of mathematics and science education sponsored by OERI. The consortium coordinates resources, disseminates exemplary instructional materials, and provides technical assistance for implementing teaching methods and assessment tools.

The SouthEast and Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (SEIR◆TEC) serves 14 states and territories. A seven-member partnership led by SERVE, the consortium offers a variety of services to foster the infusion of technology into K-12 classrooms. The Region IV Comprehensive Assistance Center provides a coordinated, comprehensive approach to technical assistance through its partnership with SERVE.

A set of special purpose institutes completes the system of SERVE resources. These institutes provide education stakeholders extended site-based access to high quality professional development programs, evaluation and assessment services, training and policy development to improve school safety, and subject area or project-specific planning and implementation assistance to support clients' school improvement goals.

Following the distributive approach to responding and providing services to its customers, SERVE has ten offices in the region. The North Carolina office at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is headquarters for the Laboratory's executive services and operations. Policy offices are located in the departments of education in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

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